

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN BENIN KINGDOM: ARO IDEN AS A CASE STUDY**

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**SEPTEMBER,2023**

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**A RESEARCH WORK SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION,  
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HONOURS DEGREE IN RELIGIONS**

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**CERTIFICATION**

This is to certify that this project was carried out by **IGBINOVIA OSAIVIBE ELLA** with the Mat. Number; **ART1802033** in the Department of Religions, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Bachelor of Arts

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## **DEDICATION**

This work is dedicated first of all to Almighty God for His mercy, blessings and favour and to my lovely parents, Mr. and Mrs. IGBINOVIA.

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My Immense gratitude goes to the Almighty God for the wonderful things he has done for me and for his grace through out my journey in University of Benin.I have come this far by his faithfulness and mercy.A special thanks to my amiable supervisor Prof. Wilson Ehianu for his patience love and directions in the course of writing this project .I could not have wished for a better supervisor .Sir,I am grateful for the effort through out this work,may God continue to bless you and your lovely family .

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study examines the role of women in Benin Kingdom using Aro Iden as a case study. This has become necessary because inspite of the tremendous sacrifice made by Queen Iden towards the survival of Benin kingdom, no scholarly study has been done in this regard. The research employed historical method. Oral interviews and personal observation, books, journals, published and unpublished articles and internet sources were also consulted as part of secondary sources of information. The study discovers that Queen Iden's sacrifice helped shape Benin Kingdom. She was the queen during the reign of Oba Ewuape in about 1700 AD. She is known to have volunteered herself as a sacrificial lamb for the welfare of her husband and that of the entire kingdom.

## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of the Study**

Individuals are an integral part of the society. When the individuals reach the age of four, they begin to realize that outside their home also there is a world, which they must recognize. Family is regarded as the foundation, from where the growth and development of the individuals takes place, hence, they give preference to their family members. But apart from family members, individuals live within the society, therefore, they have a vital role to play towards the society. The role of women within the society is recognized in various spheres, social, political, economic, religious, and cultural. The role of women within the society is primarily recognized in the ways that promote its well-being. In some cases, their contributions towards promoting well-being of the society are through their employment, such as, when they are employed in schools or higher educational institutions in teaching positions, then they are not only generating a source of income to sustain their livelihoods, but are working for the welfare of the society, by imparting knowledge and generating awareness among the individuals.

The roles of women are primarily recognized in the social, political, economic, cultural and religious spheres. In these spheres, when they are to possess efficient skills and abilities, so they are able to render their participation in an effectual manner. In addition to the skills and abilities, it is vital for women to generate awareness in terms of the factors influencing their participation. Possessing information regarding these factors also enables them in overcoming the barriers that may arise within the course of performance of roles. When women are performing various types of roles, they need to ensure that they work effectively towards promoting well-being of their family and community. In other words, they need to ensure that their contribution is beneficial to the individuals.

Women, belonging to all age groups and backgrounds get engaged into honorary work towards promoting the well-being of the individuals. Some of the honorary ways are, providing coaching classes to children, belonging to marginalized and socio-economically backward sections of the society, or making donations of food items, clothing, and other items of daily use to poverty-stricken individuals and so forth. In India, women reside in the conditions of poverty, they are illiterate, do not have access to proper health care facilities, are victims of violence, and abuse, are discriminated against, neglected, and do not enjoy equal rights and opportunities as the male counterparts (Mbogori, 2014).

The Benin society is one of class and sex domination consisting of the superior versus the inferior on one hand and dominant versus the dominated on the other hand” (Erhahon, 2002). According to Isekhure (2011), the concept of “woman” or “women” in Edo is such that they are seen and regarded as “OKHUO ORE OWA” (meaning, a woman is the home) and again “IYEOWA” (Mother of the home). Women’s purpose in the society was to be mothers of children. The role of women in Benin pre-colonial era was limited to childbearing, child-rearing and house managing. “...And these of course require a lot of energy and time. At the end of the day, she is tired and used up”. (Salami, 2001)

The foregoing does not mean that women in pre-colonial era did not have any right. They have some personal rights, which included the right to own personal property, such as farm, but not the right to own the land which they farm on. They also had the right to cultivate the husband’s plots, and the absolute right to buy and sell in the market. Despite these freedoms, however, according to Ebohon (1972), from time immemorial, women in Benin were regarded as inferior class of citizen. Evhierhoma (2009), asserts that the “Bini society, is acclaimed to be highly rich in culture and tradition. However, this culture in its richness hemlines women, limiting their autonomy, through taboos and observances which many see as obsolete behind the time and retrogressive”. Indeed, besides their motherly and wifely roles, they have been critical actors in several developmental activities, (Umar &Abdullahi, 2007).

Benin kingdom during the pre-colonial era witnessed massive contributions of women to the building and sustenance of Benin kingdom. “Emotan in Bini history was a quiet, simple market woman, who despite her status and the public opinion of the period took a resolve to change her society for the better. Emotan advocated the participation of women in activities outside the home, especially income generating ones”, says Evwierhoma (2009). She was not intimidated by the menfolk who dominated the political terrain. It was not common to see women taking centre stage in that era despite the inferiority ascribed to women. According to Salami (2001), “she feared nobody but respected all. Her courage in preaching against injustice is worthy of note. For this, she was feared and respected by the people of Benin. She fought against injustice and oppression of the weak”.

Among her contributions to the kingdom, the most notable one was her role in helping Prince Ogun (who later took the title of Oba Ewuare) to ascend the throne. Salami (2001), says Oba Eware was conspired against because of his boldness, knowledge and of his power. Oba Orobiru was coaxed to send prince Ogun into exile thereby preventing him from becoming Oba. Evwierhoma (2009), states that “she rendered assistance uncommon to her gender at the time, to Ewuare the Great, also known as Ogun, to retire from exile and ascend the throne of Benin, as king, banishing the Usurper, Uwaifiokun. Thus, Emotan can be said to affirm the historical projection of women through the various facets of time the now, the then, and the next.

Iden was the wife of Oba Ewakpe the great. Shortly after Oba Ewakpe was enthroned, there was a revolt against him by the Benin people. The people were angered against the unwholesome human sacrifice for ritual performance at his mother's funeral. Salami (2001), notes that "as a result, they went to the palace and seized all the valuable property there, threw open the doors of the harem for the wives and the children to return to their parents, the slaves were given liberty, the sword bearer and others were also set free". He was left with nothing.

Queen Iden chose to stay with him and bore the shame together. Oral tradition has it that she was the only companion that was left to console the Oba, and she brought the idea of consulting the oracle with their last savings. According to Salami, (2001), the oracle demanded a human sacrifice and other food items as the price for regaining his former glory. Neither servant nor slave to be sacrificed. Queen Iden offered herself to be sacrificed if that would bring joy and restore the glory of the land. After prolonged argument between Iden and Oba Ewakpe, according to oral tradition, Iden was sacrificed by being buried alive and other food items provided. Salami (2001) opines that "She was a martyr who died for the continuation of the throne of Benin". Indeed, she was, she is and continue to be a martyr and a reference point.

In general, one can say that women in that era were an integral part of the political set up of their communities, although they assumed responsibilities different from that of men, in most cases these responsibilities were complimentary to that of men.

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## **1.2 Definition of Terms**

### **1.2.1 Benin Kingdom:**

Benin, a pre-colonial kingdom in what is now southwestern Nigeria, is believed to have been established before the eleventh century. It was founded by Edo-speaking peoples, but became more ethnically diverse when invaders from the grasslands of the Sudan settled and intermarried with local women.

**1.2.2 Benin Women:** Benin woman” can be defined as an adult human female whose origin is from Benin kingdom. The concept “woman” is seen as a lesser being inherently. Benin women are only mentioned in history and no detailed attention has been paid to their input and impact in the society.

**1.2.3. Aro Iden:** Iden was the wife of Oba Ewakpe the great who sacrifices are life for the peace of the kingdom

## **1.3 Statement of the Problems**

Women population of 68.3 million constitutes nearly half of the entire nation’s population, of 140 million (National Population Commission, 2006). This numerical strength has not been translated to equal treatment in the society apart from mathematical strength, women have great abilities to evolve a new economic order, thereby helping in accelerating social and political development and consequently converting the society into a better one. The problems of oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and subjugation of women are neither new phenomena nor peculiar to Benin women. Millions of women across the globe under the condition of object deprivation and attack

against their natural and fundamental human rights. It appears that majority of Benin women suffer discrimination, exploitation, or oppression because of their gender and, therefore, regarded as members of the subordinate or lower class. Even though women have contributed to the development of Benin, there is paucity of literature in that direction. The study was an Iden a modest attempt to fulfil this gap.

#### **1.4 Aims and Objectives**

The following aims and objectives have been outlined for the study which are:

To find out the roles of women in Benin kingdom.

To examine the social role of women in Benin kingdom in the pre-colonial era.

Find out the relevance's of women in Benin kingdom.

To investigate the contribution of Queen iden to the survival of Benin Kingdom.

#### **1.5 Significance of the Study**

The roles of women within the society are dedicated towards advocating human development, social justice and are influencing the policy-induced change. In India, the policy-advocacy on women's issues involves the context-specific challenges due to the politico-religious societies and institutions. Women, who are social workers are challenged by different gendered-roles across the public and the private systems, while promoting gender equality in India. Therefore, policy-advocacy on women's issues implies the transforming gendered social frameworks and confront a range of entities and

institutions, governed by the state policies (Dhaske, 2016). Hence, it can be stated that when participating in any roles towards the society, women need to ensure that they follow the rules and promote well-being of the individuals as well as the community in a well-organized manner.

### **1.6 Scope and Limitations of the Study**

This research work focuses on the roles of women in Benin Kingdom Aro Iden as a case study. The study will cover the various roles of women in Benin kingdom. The impacts of women in Benin kingdom in the pre-colonial era. The relevance's of women in Benin kingdom. The advent of colonization and how it effects on the roles of woman in Benin Kingdom.

### **1.7 Research Methodology**

A study of the roles of women in Benin Kingdom Aro Iden as a case study is best done when the method used is phenomenological, historical, expository and critical. The nature of this work therefore calls for this methodology is that a critic is much more meaningful when it follows a thorough and robust analysis and exposition of a system of thought. The eclectic methodology will help in giving a panoptic view of the topic under our focus the roles of women in Benin Kingdom Aro Iden as a case study. The work will make use of library materials that deals with issue raised in this work.

## **1.8 Division of Work**

This work is divided into five chapters.

Chapter one consists of background to the study, statement of the problem, aims and objectives, significance of the study, scope and limitation of the study, research methodology.

Chapter two which is the literature review consist of Benin kingdom political setting, social setting, economical setting, religious setting.

Chapter three is on women in Benin kingdom, their political roles, social roles, economic roles, religious role. Chapter four is on Aro Iden, the early life of Aro Iden, marriage life of Iden, challenges of Iden, sacrifices of Iden.

Chapter five the work is on of evaluation, recommendation, conclusion and reference

## CHAPTER TWO

### 2.0

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 Benin Kingdom

The historical kingdom of Benin was established in the forested region of West Africa in the 1200s C.E. According to history, the Edo people of southern Nigeria founded Benin. They no longer wanted to be ruled by their kings, known as the ogisos. They asked a prince from Ife, an important West African kingdom, to take control. The first oba, or king, in Benin was Eweka. He was the son of the prince from Ife.

The kingdom reached its greatest power and size under Oba Ewuare the Great. He expanded the kingdom and improved the capital, present-day Benin City; the city was defined by massive walls. The height of power for Benin's monarchs began during this period. To honor the powerful obas, the people of Benin participated in many rituals that expressed their devotion and loyalty, including human sacrifices.

Artists of the Benin Kingdom were well known for working in many materials, particularly brass, wood, and ivory. They were famous for their bas-relief sculptures, particularly plaques, and life-size head sculptures. The plaques typically portrayed historical events, and the heads were often naturalistic and life size. Artisans also carved many different ivory objects, including masks and, for their European trade partners, salt cellars.

The success of Benin was fueled by its lively trade. Tradesmen and artisans from Benin developed relationships with the Portuguese, who sought after the kingdom's artwork, gold, ivory, and pepper. In the early modern era, Benin was also heavily involved in the West African slave trade. They would capture men, women, and children from rival peoples and sell them into slavery to European and American buyers. This trade provided a significant source of wealth for the kingdom. Benin began to lose power during the 1800s, as royal family members fought for power and control of the throne. Civil wars broke out, dealing a significant blow to both Benin's administration as well as its economy. In its weakened state, Benin struggled to resist foreign interference in its trading network, particularly by the British. A desire for control over West African trade and territory ultimately led to a British invasion of Benin in 1897. Benin City was burned by the British, who then made the kingdom part of British Nigeria (which became Nigeria after the country gained independence in 1960). After that time, the kingdom no longer played a governing role in West Africa. However, even today, the oba still serves in Benin City as a government advisor.

## **2.2 Benin Kingdom Political Setting**

In today's southern Nigeria, the Kingdom of Benin reached its artistic splendor from 1400 through 1600. The kingdom began in the 900s when the Edo people started building settlements. After continued warfare with others in the 1100s, they asked a neighboring king for help, and the king sent his son, who took command of the territory.

By the 1400s, the new Oba (king) increased his army and began annexing additional lands, helping build a vast and wealthy kingdom. Benin traded along the western African coastline while ruling over the neighboring tribes. A series of earthen walls have been recently excavated and believed to stretch over 8,000 kilometers, perhaps to delineate territory. Because the houses were constructed of the local mud, the humid, wet weather has caused the walls to disintegrate and become part of the soil, making it impossible to discern the style and size.

The king's court was an immense area composed of palaces, homes for family and courtiers, and large gathering spaces. The kingdom had a strict social structure with the king and the highest priest, a semi-divine figure. The king ruled with input from a council usually composed of the many princely descendants with multiple wives. "According to Drapper, his harem consisted of nine hundred wives guarded by eunuchs. All the land belonged to the king, and no other person could inherit property without the king's consent.

Artists were arranged into guilds for different types of materials or art under the direction of a master guild leader. The guilds were responsible for taking direction from the Oba for whatever requirements he needed. The 1400s became the Oba's Golden Age, the extended Benin City the center of a widespread kingdom. When the Portuguese came in the late 1400s, they found metropolitan areas, sizeable palaces, and homes all decorated with artworks made of ivory, bronze, brass, wood, and natural elements from animals and

plants. When the British invaded in 1897, they destroyed the palaces and took most of the brass, ivory, and wooden artworks.

Initially, Benin crafted bronze by hammering and incising, then learned to cast bronze with the lost-wax method producing elaborate artwork. They used other materials also; however, because of the long-lasting quality of bronze, most of the surviving artifacts were made of bronze. During this period, the communities were surrounded by walls and ditches, and an Oba ruled each clan. The Oba or a designate could only commission the works of bronze, and the bronze artwork was kept in the palace. Each Oba maintained their own guild of artisans who were masters of their trade. The objects were created to exalt the king, his household, armies, and others of elite status and used in ceremonial events. When an Oba took his position, he had to create an altar to honor his father and his mother if she was a queen, these pieces of art were made for use on the altar. Other artwork was created for agricultural festivals, spiritual activities, or ceremonial events.

Although artifacts were made of bronze, many were created from brass, similar materials using the same procedure for construction. Bronze is mainly made from copper with the addition of tin and small amounts of other minerals. Bronze was the original material used by artists since 3500 BCE. Brass was also made with copper and mixed with zinc instead of tin with other trace elements as required. The melting point for brass is lower than bronze and is somewhat more malleable. It is unknown when Benin started casting brass; however, it was a highly respected talent, and the kings supported a guild for brass

casting. Using the lost-wax method, they made exceptionally detailed models, then covered the model with clay. When heated, the wax melted out of a channel, and the liquid metal was poured in to set. The clay was broken away after the metal hardened.

The first obligation of the new king was to create a shrine, dedicated to his predecessor and serving as the site at which the living monarch communicated with his ancestor or father. Ensuring dynastic continuity, the shrine held various carved and cast artifacts, including freestanding brass heads... The head acted as a vessel through which the late king transferred his power to the new king, the latter accepting the responsibility for successfully directing and defining his life. The Edo people considered the head to be the locus of a man's character, knowledge, authority, success, and family leadership. These sculptural heads were a consistent visual point of reference from ruler to ruler, reinforcing the idea of familial succession across a single dynasty. The Oba is often called by his praise name "Great Head," emphasizing the head of the living leader as the center of responsibility for the kingdom

The bronze or brass heads sat on ancestral altars and were not based on the exact facial characteristics of the departed but rather on a stylistic, natural look. Some metalheads had an opening in the top to hold an elephant tusk engraved with decorative images. "The metal pieces were made using lost-wax casting and are considered among the best sculptures made using this technique.

The cast bronze head portrayed an idealized likeness, generally made to look like the Oba when he was young. The woven cap on his head is patterned after coral beads with a single bead hanging down on his forehead, a tribute to the artist who created the perfect symmetry and detailed cap. Coral was imported, a valuable commodity for the Oba. His face reflects the perfect youth in a natural, undistorted image. The head would be placed on the altar made to honor the king.

According to Bondarenko (1987), the time of the so-called Ist (Ogiso) Dynasty - probably the early 10th - first half of 12th centuries, is one of the most mysterious pages in Benin's history. The sources on this period are not abundant. Furthermore, it is obvious that the rather scarce archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence should be supplemented by an analysis of different records of the oral historical tradition, although it is well known that this kind of source is not very reliable. However, on the other hand, it is generally recognized that it is unreasonable to discredit it completely. Though Benin students have confirmed this conclusion and demonstrated some possibilities of verifying and correcting its evidence, a reconstruction of the early Benin history will inevitably contain many hypothetical suggestions and not so many firm conclusions. To the Binis, the Ogiso time is the period of social creation of the world, comparable to the creation of the land. That is why, not only due to the lack of true historical data, native recorders of the oral tradition have not even attempted to give dates of different Ogiso reigns. For them the linear concept of time only applies to the era starting with the establishment of the present, 2nd dynasty. The previous rulers live in a timeless semi-mythical space. The

very title Ogiso means “the king from the sky” or “the king of the sky.” All the aforesaid corresponds to the specifics of the archaic vision of the universe, the most important part of which is the people’s own society. The Ogiso period in records of the oral tradition represents the chronicler’s attempt to overthrow history into timelessness (so characteristic of the mythological consciousness and picture of the universe), where history loses its main distinctive feature: its duration in time. For the Bini, all the Ogiso reigned in immemorial times, before the Moon and the Sun appeared, prior to the social creation of the world (that is before the establishment of the present, 2nd dynasty in the early 13th century) and that is why they are felt as contemporaries of each other in their common timelessness. It is generally accepted by Benin native historians that altogether 31 Ogiso “kings” ruled, but this figure, of course, may be conventional, hardly more. Above all, the Ogiso lists made by different native historians are not completely identical in terms of the length of the Ogiso period, the rulers’ names and the order of their appearance on the throne. There is but little known of the coming to power and reign of the first Ogiso, Igodo. Maybe he is a purely mythological figure.

The most prominent native historian, Jacob U. Egharevba, relates on this point: “... one of the prominent leaders, Igodo, was made Ogiso or king. The version of the oral tradition offered by politically engaged local historians further tells that he lived long and had a great number of descendants. However, Darling writes Benin’s territorial and political rights have been transposed back in time to legitimize later conquests - new termed rebellions within its subsequent kingdom area. Udo - an independent rival

kingdom until its early 16th century conquest by Benin - is regarded as having been rebellious since Ogiso times. In the light of this, we may suppose that coming to power of the first Ogiso and the establishment of the very institution of the Ogiso was far from being peaceful. It looks very much as if in reality Igodo was not made the Ogiso, as Egharevba, as well as another Benin court historian, Eweka wrote, but became him.

Someone getting acquainted with the Benin history may be misled by the outstanding role of Benin City and think that the Bini society was being built around her from the very beginning. In reality, the process of growth and integration of chiefdoms and communities occurred in different parts of Bini land and not less than ten proto-city settlements had appeared at the time of chief-doms rapid growth, by the brink of the 1st and 2nd millennia. They struggled with each other for the role of the sole place of attraction for the overwhelming majority if not all the Bini, the focal point of their culture in the broadest meaning of the word, their political and in connection with it sacro-ritual centre. The one hundred and thirty Bini chiefdoms and great number of independent communities drew towards different proto-cities. Finally, Benin City gained the victory.

Due to the obtaining of the exclusive political function and position, she grew and eventually became one of the most important urban centres of Upper Guinea while the other proto-cities went down to the level of big villages. That was also the fate of Udo, the settlement situated about 24 km to the north-west of Benin City, which was her most violent rival for many centuries. However, some versions of the oral historical tradition suggest that Udo was probably the original settlement of the Ogiso. The period of the

Bini chiefdoms flourishing is associated with their coming to power, and its reign gave an additional impetus to their further appearance and growth. This was also the time of the first attempt at establishing not only supra-communal, but also supra-chiefdom authority in the country; to be distinct, in the part of Bini land round Benin City, the appearance of which predated the 1st dynasty.

### **2.3 Economical System of Benin Kingdom**

Initially the trade relationship between Benin and the British was boosted by the availability of pepper in Benin. It would be recalled that when the British first came to Benin, their main interest was pepper. The Oba of Benin was particularly aware that the main interest of the British in their early contact was pepper and he was ready to sell to them. Despite the disaster registered during the first visit of the British to Benin in 1553, Allan Burns viewed the journey of Wyndham as a huge success (Burns, 1969). This, according to him, was because, within thirty days of arrival in Benin, they had collected 80 tons of pepper and some quantity of gold and ivory (Burns, 1969). Slave was another important item of trade between the British and the Benin people. John Adams notes that during the period of the slave trade, English ships acquired slaves regularly from Benin through the Ughoton seaport (Ryder, 1979). The first English ship arrived Ughoton in September 1724. It began to buy slaves at twice the price the Dutch offered. By the 1730s, English slave traders dominated the slave trade business at the Benin River (Ryder, 1979). Most of these English ships came from Liverpool and belonged to private traders. Sailing directly from England with merchandise known to be in demand on the Guinea coast,

they were always able to undersell the ill-stocked Dutch factory and win the favour of the Benin authorities (Ryder,1979). Apart from the slaves, British traders also bought some amount of ivory in Benin which they carried directly for sales to the English colonies in the West Indies and North America. On their return journey, they loaded their ships with colonial produce to complete the final leg of the triangular voyage (Ryder, 1979). Available record indicates that by 1752, five ships sailed from Liverpool to Benin to buy a total of 1,280 slaves. Similarly, on 28 June, 1757, another British ship, Rainbow under the Command of Captain Harrison, who was already well acquainted with Benin, entered the river and stayed for four and a half months. Thereafter, it left for Barbados with 261 slaves.

The main sources of the slaves were the casualties of civil war and the normal course of trade with their neighbouring states. Again some prisoners were sold as slaves. The Oba of Benin sometimes presented slaves as gifts to important persons. Generally, the English slave dealers did not build fortresses on the Delta coast like the Portuguese did, as they transacted their business with the coastal middlemen aboard their ships and the middlemen cum-chiefs who were paid customs duty known as comedy (Izuakor, 1987). The cloth, which had been the staple of Benin's exports in the 17th century, lost its importance and was replaced in outward cargoes by slaves, including male slaves whose sale abroad had been forbidden since the early 16th century. This regular trade contact between Benin and the British brought abundant prosperity to the Benin kingdom in the eighteenth century, especially during the reigns of Obas Eresoyen (1740-1750) and

Akengbuda (1750-1804). However, from the mid-eighteenth century, the supply of slaves dwindled drastically. A glaring case was in 1798 when English ships were sent to buy a total of 19,450 slaves in the eastern delta e.g. Bonny as against 1,000 in the Benin River and most of these slaves were acquired from among the Itsekiris in the western Delta (Donnan, 1930). Many factors could be adduced for this ugly development. First, there was an embargo on the sale of male slaves by Oba Esigie from the beginning of the sixteenth century and this lasted for about 200years. The embargo on the sale of male slaves in Benin became necessary because Oba Esigie (1504-1550) faced some military challenges at home. In fact, Benin suffered serious threats of invasion from both the Arhuanhan of Udo and Idah during the period. This made it highly imperative to keep a large army to secure his empire which he inherited from Oba Ozolua. The ban was, however, lifted during the reign of Oba Akenzua I (1712-1740). Second, there was the issue of medical challenge.

Adams, who visited Benin around the 17th century attributed the neglect of Benin by slave ships to the alarming sickness rate that affected vessels anchored there (Adams, 1922). Ughoton seaport was soon regarded as a notorious place due to the high death rate among traders serving there. Pacheco Pereira once said that:All these rivers are very unhealthy because of the fever which does grievous harm to us white men especially in the winter of this country and that Duarte Lopes died in Ughoton a few months after his arrival in 1504. Third, ports at the mouths of the tributary rivers were reputed to be healthier than inland places such as Ughoton or Ode Itsekiri. Hence, the Benin slave trade

suffered from additional handicap as very large ships could not enter the tributary river as only small ones could reach Ughoton. They also had to wait several months to complete their cargoes. This was later compounded by the prohibition of slavery by British ships which led to an almost complete cessation of that nation's trade in the Benin River. However, the industrial revolution which started in Britain around the mid-19th century closed the gap. Ryder maintains that the abolition of the slave trade encouraged Liverpool merchants to develop trade in palm produce on a commercial scale. The abolition coincided with the growth of an industrial demand for oil in the manufacture of soap, lubricants, margarine, candle and pharmaceutical products while the residual kernel cake served as a valuable livestock feed (Ryder, 1979; Ahazuem and Falola, 1987).

Ekundare (1973) adds that palm oil also found a large application in the manufacture of tinsplate and that made it largely imperative for the Benin people to increase the production of palm oil in order to cater for both internal consumption in Nigeria and the industrial demand in Europe. For centuries now, the oil palm has equally been used domestically for a variety of purposes such as supplying materials for food, shelter, fuel and illumination. Henceforth, oil palm produce became an important item of trade between the British and Benin and was indeed one of the earliest Nigerian commodities to enter the European market during the period of legitimate trade in the 19th century. It later became a major European export in the latter part of the century (Ahazuem and Falola, 1987). This was popularly referred to as legitimate commerce meant to obtain raw materials from West Africa during the industrial revolution in England (Nigeria

Educational Research Council, 1978). The industrial revolution also brought about changes by the introduction of factories which meant that instead of being produced in homes, goods were now for the first time being produced in factories with the aid of machinery which were power-driven. The most important invention of this period was the creation of the steam engine and the discovery of a method resulting in the making of steel. The steam engine paved the way for industrial mechanization and the invention of steel meant that new, stronger tools and machinery could be made in vast quantities. This was further complemented by the development of modern machineries capable of revolutionizing the weaving industry and the agricultural sector.

The British-Benin trade relations got a great boost because of the abundance of palm oil which was vital for her industrial expansion. The British saw palm oil as a major substitute for slave trade hence the trade relationship was strengthened. Bold drew attention to the rich palm oil resource of the Benin area (Bold, 1999). Ryder remarks that from the 1840s, the Benin River was an important centre of the palm-oil trade and played its part in involving the British government in the enmeshed problems of protecting and disciplining its subjects and their property involved in that trade (Ryder, 1979). It should be noted that in the waterside trade with the Europeans, the Oba had monopoly rights over certain articles the most notable being palm oil and kernels. The only subjects who shared the palm oil trade monopoly privileges with the Oba were a few of the important chiefs in Benin (National Archives Enugu (NAE), 1915). As a further illustration of the abundance of oil-palm products in Benin between 1928 and 1936, the colonial

government encouraged the establishment of oil palm plantations which were owned and managed by Nigerians. Most of these plantations were found in the Benin area. Again the government established Oil Palm Research Institute at Evbonaka village which is just five kilometers to Benin City. It was formerly the West African Institute for Oil Palm Research. Its mandate was to embark on relevant research on oil palm production and to offer for sale seedling of high yielding strains or species. So it was not a surprise when it was said that the British ships reached Ughoton, the seaport of Benin where elephant teeth, palm oil, native cloth and utensils of various kinds were exchanged for European commodities. British economic interests dictated that an alternative to the slave trade must be found.

The industrial revolution also accelerated the demand for a wide range of tropical products particularly palm oil. It was for this reason that the abundance of oil-palm products in Benin rapidly boosted the trade relations between Benin and the British within the period under focus. The rubber trade was another dimension to the British-Benin trade relations. The availability of rubber product in Benin area was further increased by the British colonial masters during colonial rule. Geary had earlier remarked that the British expedition to Benin in 1897 opened up over 3,000 square miles of rubber forests and other African produce (Geary, 1927). Shortly after the expedition, Britain immediately intensified efforts to exploit the rubber forests in Benin at a commercial level. For instance, Alfred Turner in a letter to the Consul-General, Ralph Moor on 30 April, 1997, reported "that he had been encouraging the rubber trade to the utmost, even

giving practical lessons in court having as yet not had the chance of going into the bush" (National Archives Ibadan (NAI), 1999). The local production of rubber increased substantially thereafter to the extent that apart from the local labourers in Benin, countless Yoruba and Calabar migrants were employed annually for rubber tapping. However, it was in the last quarter of the nineteenth century that Benin experienced the rubber boom which further facilitated the trade relationship between the British and Benin. This period witnessed the invention of the pneumatic rubber tyre by J. B. Dunlop, a Scottish Surgeon, and inventor (Igbafe, 1979). Igbafe further opines that Dunlop constructed the pneumatic tyre for his child's bicycle in 1887 and after being tested, it was patented on 7 December, 1888 (Igbafe, 1979). He explains further that the production of the pneumatic tyre on a commercial scale from 1890 onwards and its successive adaptation first for the use of bicycles and later for cars stimulated and accentuated the desire to penetrate the thick tropical forests where large quantities of rubber-producing trees abounded. This event no doubt encouraged the British traders to promote their trade contact with Benin through their Oba, His Royal Highness, Oba Ovonramwen. This was because the Oba had effective control over the Benin forests. So to gain access to these forests, the Oba must give his approval, which he did. But unfortunately for Benin, the British purpose in Benin was beyond trade. Later they extended their interest to effective occupation which eventually led to the fall of the empire. Timber was another item of trade between the Binis and the British.

The Benin forests contained excellent woods for domestic and commercial purposes. So it is not under the contention that Benin forests contain important timber reserves. Most of this exported timber found its way to Europe particularly to Britain where for instance, mahogany was used for a multiplicity of purposes such as the manufacture of aircraft propellers during the war, furniture, ornamental construction work, paneling, shipbuilding and so on. It is against this background that the excellent woods from Benin came to prominence. Many species of tropical hardwoods such as Iroko, Obeche, Mahogany, and others abound in Benin which made the area more attractive to the European traders and merchants (Moore, 1999). Timber indeed played a significant role in the sustenance of economic relations between Benin and the British in the Niger Coast Protectorate as stressed by the Consul-General, Ralph Moore, in a report on 6 October, 1999. Although the reference was the Protectorate, Benin was not left out in this trade promotion because of the presence of these mineral resources. In an interview with Bernard Raji on 16 January 2017, he disclosed that Benin had large forest reserves where excellent woods were produced for local and external needs. Ivory was another item which attracted the British traders to Benin territory. Among the earliest accounts of the trade is that given by Bold who remarked that ivory was still the chief commodity exported from Benin and that it could be had in large quantities (Bold, 1999). Burns (1969) submitted that in the first British contact with Benin in 1553, the British traders collected 80 tons of pepper and some quantity of gold and ivory. Even in a computation of imports and exports including shipping by the Consul-General of the Protectorate to

Foreign Office for the year 1896-1897, ivory was mentioned in the following report: The only variations which are noticeable are a decrease of 50 percent in Ivory exported, an increase of 25 percent in rubber and a decrease of 50 percent in coffee (Moore, 1997). The above evidence shows that the Ivory trade which started in around the sixteenth century lasted till the end of the nineteenth century, and probably beyond.

After the capture of Benin by the British forces, the city was looted by the invading forces during which an estimated £800 worth of ivory was taken from the palace as at February 1897 (Moore to Sa Bury, 1997). Earlier on 28 June 1757, Captain Harrison Commanded the Rainbow to the Benin River and purchased 5,400 pounds of Ivory to Barbados. The Oba reportedly claimed one tusk on every elephant killed and invariably bought the second from the hunter. It was in this fashion that the large store of ivory was accumulated which the British found after the capture of the city (Alfred and Ralph, 1997). In fact, James R. Philips who took over duties as Acting Commissioner and Consul-General of the Niger Coast Protectorate on 19 October 1896 was said to have been motivated by economic interests to visit Benin quickly on assumption of duty. His purpose was to depose Oba Ovonranmwen and thus have full access to the natural resources. Philips had probably envisaged a large collection of Ivory in the King's house which in his view would be sufficient to offset the cost of the operations or attack on Benin. Whatever be the case, however, the above discussions suggest that trade in ivory immensely promoted and enhanced the trade relations between the British and Benin. Other articles of trade from Benin include Benin locally-made cotton cloth which was

even regarded as the staple of Benin's exports in the 17th century. Furthermore, Ryder posits that James Welsh exchanged some of his merchandise for cowries in order to buy local produce for his crew who drank plentifully of Benin locally tapped palm wine and ate honey, oranges and plantains and, above all, yams which he warmly commended as a substitute for bread or biscuit (Ryder, 1979).

## **2.4 Political Organization of Benin Kingdom**

At the summit of pre-colonial society was the king (oba), who was the focal point of all administrative, religious, commercial, and judicial concerns. He was the last resort in court matters, the recipient of taxes and tribute, the controller of trade, the theoretical owner of all the land in the kingdom, and the chief executive and legislator. As the divine king, he crystallized generalized ancestor worship in the worship of his own ancestors. It is in his office, then, that the various hierarchies met. The members of the king's family were automatically part of the nobility. His mother was a title holder (iyoba) in one of the palace societies and maintained her own court near Benin City, and his younger brothers were sent to be hereditary chiefs of villages throughout the kingdom, thus constituting part of a limited, rural-based elite. Besides the king and his family, the political structure consisted of the holders of various chiefly titles, who were organized into three main orders of chiefs: the seven uzama, the palace chiefs, and the town chiefs. These various orders of chiefs formed the administrative bureaucracy of the kingdom, and their main concern was to augment the king's civil and ritual authority. They constituted the state council, which had an important role in creating laws, regulating festivals, raising taxes,

declaring war, and conducting rituals. The king controlled the granting of most of these chiefly titles and used this power to consolidate his control over governmental processes. Once granted, a title could not be rescinded unless treason could be proven. The kingdom was formerly divided into a number of tribute units, which corresponded to local territorial groupings. Each was controlled by a title holder in Benin City, who acted as the intermediary between the villagers and the king and whose main duty was to collect taxes and tribute in the form of money (cowries) and goods (cattle, yams, etc.). The income the king received from these sources enabled him to carry on elaborate state rituals. The king could also call on villagers to supply labor for the upkeep of the royal palace. Kings varied over time in their ability to control the political situation. At the end of the eighteenth century, for example, senior chiefs rebelled against the king, and a long civil war ensued, which the king finally won. According to oral traditions, several obas were in fact deposed. In contemporary Nigeria, Edo State officials consult with the Benin king and chiefs. Since 1966, the federal level of government in Nigeria has vacillated between military and civilian rule, with the exact relationship between federal and traditional authority changing under each new circumstance. In 1993 the newly established military government dissolved all existing state bodies and prohibited political activity. Supreme executive and legislative power was vested in a military-based Provisional Ruling Council and an Executive Council, both headed by the commander-in-chief, who is also the head of state. Plans for a return to civilian rule have been announced

## **2.5 Religious Setting of Benin Kingdom**

There are a number of ways of deducing what a people believe about a particular divinity. Through an analysis of the mythology the researcher is able to dig beneath the complexities and even absurdities of myth in order to perceive what is the 'truth ' ' about a particular divinity. Fortunately, there are a number of printed documents connected with the founding of the Holy Aruosa Church. These writings contain a number of Edo myths about Osanobua. I will attempt to analyze them as one means of arriving at the Edo representation of Osanobua. Another important means of ascertaining what the Edo think about the High God is through an analysis of the names the Edo give to their children. Omijie (1968) writing in Nigeria Magazine's Literary Supplement states: Bini names reflect the Bini thought—especially since they express in most cases very many ideas, beliefs and maxims. Bini names are, therefore, expressed proverbially, and I choose to call them so for want of a better term: Proverb-Names. Unlike North American names, African names have profound meaning and significance.

Cragg(1968), writing 'Christian symbolism and the African mind, ' has noted that 'names, in the white world , are no more than what men "are called. " Not so in Africa where they are what men are. For our purposes the name functions as a recorder of an individual's perception of the activity of divinity. A name will be given not only as a tribute to a particular divinity but also as an indicator that the divinity has spoken or intervened in Edo affairs. The name can be given to reflect an Edo's predicament at a particular historical time (eg. familial conflict) or certain problems relate d to the actual birth of the child. An analysis of Osa-names points to what the Edo believes is the nature

of Osanobua as well as how the Edo interpret certain events as a manifestation of Osanobua. Olokun is believed by the Edo to be the powerful son of Osanobua to who has been delegated the supervision of wealth, health and fertility. Olokun can be viewed as the repository of blessing, serving as the source of such for those operating within the Edo traditional religious system. Since Olokun is served by a priest who is believed to be in close or special relationship to him, considerable time was spent with a number of Ohen Olokun discussing the nature of their divinity. One soon learns that there is a body of knowledge, a theology if you will, of Olokun. It is also possible to crosscheck the elicited information. For example, if an Edo says that Olokun is often approached by a barren woman for a child, it would be discovered that numerous sacrifices have been made to Olokun for these purposes, then one can assume that the information elicited from the Ohen Olokun is not spurious. However, this by no means exhausts the possibilities of discovering 'truths' about Olokun.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF BENIN WOMEN**

#### **3.1 Benin Women in the Pre-Colonial Era**

“The Benin society is one of class and sex domination consisting of the superior versus the inferior on one hand and dominant versus the dominated on the other hand”(Erhahon, 2002). According to Isekhure (2011), the concept of “woman” or “women” in Edo is such that they are seen and regarded as “OKHUO ORE OWA” (meaning, a woman is the home) and again “IYEOWA” (Mother of the home). Women’s purpose in the society was to be mothers of children. The role of women in Benin pre-colonial era was limited to child-bearing, child-rearing and house managing. “...And

these of course require a lot of energy and time. At the end of the day, she is tired and used up”. (Salami, 2001)

The foregoing does not mean that women in pre-colonial era did not have any right. They have some personal rights, which included the right to own personal property, such as farm, but not the right to own the land which they farm on. They also had the right to cultivate the husband’s plots, and the absolute right to buy and sell in the market. Despite these freedoms, however, according to Ebohon (1972), from time immemorial, women in Benin were regarded as inferior class of citizen. Evhierhoma (2009), asserts that the “Bini society, is acclaimed to be highly rich in culture and tradition. However, this culture in its richness hemlines women, limiting their autonomy, through taboos and observances which many see as obsolete behind the time and retrogressive”. Indeed, besides their motherly and wifely roles, they have been critical actors in a number of developmental activities, (Umar &Abdullahi, 2007).

### **Benin Women in Colonial Period**

The era of colonialism for Benin women was the era of inactivity especially in politics. This was because the administration brought with it the introduction of European patriarchy into Nigeria society. The colonial period promoted predominantly male dominated social system.

However, this situation was not unique to Benin women; it was a nationwide-shared reality. Abdulraheem (2007), noted that “when the British came to Nigeria, a lot, of changes were introduced to most African culture mainly in the field of education,

politics, social activities as well as economics”. Although women played more significant roles in pre-colonial Benin society, it was still not on an equal scale; cultures still devised some means to curtail their independence. Okome (web, retrieved 11/09/2012) corroborated the fact that problems that militated against the rights of women in the colonial era were colonial laws and government. As earlier noted, it is not unique to Benin women alone, it was a continental reality. It points to the fact that despite the women’s aspiration to step out of the shackles of subordination, they still desired to conform to societal dictates. Okome (web, retrieved 11/09/2012) states “under colonial rule, women lost a great deal of authority to participate in decision making due to their exclusion from all levels of administration. They also lost maneuverability because the male-dominated elements of society were stressed above all others and applied in society, economical and political life”. In other words, there was never a true competition for their male counterparts and this could be a contributory factor to the degree of women’s participation and representation in politics today. Okome (web, retrieved 11/09/2012), highlighted the situation in this manner,

an economic system was instituted where men had more opportunities than women for meaningful participation, a legal system was introduced wherein women lost some of the benefits open to them in pre-colonial societies, and a religious system was imposed which deprived women of their pre-colonial power and authority.

The colonial era could be considered the most uneventful period in areas of women's participation and representation in politics, despite the fact that there were records of women's participation in the pre-colonial era.

### **Post Colonial Era**

Post-colonial Nigeria was the time she gained independence, the beginning of self rule through to present. Abdulraheem (2007), notes that, women participation in post-colonial era "witnessed a tremendous change". Unfortunately, socio-cultural as well as colonial influence or underlying factors still prevailed thus affecting the level of women participation. The socio-cultural cum political limitation of pre-colonial and colonial era on women translated into a mental limitation, thereby, making women to accept that it is a man's world and that they are just helpers-caregivers, labourers in the husband's vineyard, to be seen and not to be heard, to be ordered and not to order.

The post-colonial era witnessed a general constitutional empowerment of women in Nigeria. Some of the rights enshrined for equal rights between menfolk and womenfolk included equal educational rights, political rights, economic rights, environmental rights, social rights and cultural rights. According to Abdulraheem (2007), "cultures and customs in Nigeria are vehicles through which abuses and violations of women's rights are driven into the society". Post- colonial era brought a great measure of freedom for womenfolk in Benin kingdom that they can be seen and be heard.

### **3.2 Political and Social Roles of Women in Benin Kingdom**

#### **Iden**

Iden was the wife of Oba Ewakpe the great. Shortly after Oba Ewakpe was enthroned, there was a revolt against him by the Benin people. The people were angered against the unwholesome human sacrifice for ritual performance at his mother's funeral. Salami (2001), notes that "as a result, they went to the palace and seized all the valuable property there, threw open the doors of the harem for the wives and the children to return to their parents, the slaves were given liberty, the sword bearer and others were also set free". He was left with nothing. Queen Iden chose to stay with him and bore the shame together. Oral tradition has it that she was the only companion that was left to console the Oba, and she brought the idea of consulting the oracle with their last savings. According to Salami, (2001), the oracle demanded a human sacrifice and other food items as the price for regaining his former glory. Neither servant nor slave to be sacrificed. Queen Iden offered herself to be sacrificed if that would bring joy and restore the glory of the land. After prolonged argument between Iden and Oba Ewakpe, according to oral tradition, Iden was sacrificed by being buried alive and other food items provided. Salami (2001), opines that "She was a martyr who died for the continuation of the throne of Benin". Indeed she was, she is and continue to be a martyr and a reference point.

In general, one can say that women in that era were an integral part of the political set up of their communities, although they assumed responsibilities different from that of men, in most cases these responsibilities were complimentary to that of men.

## **Idia**

Historical account has it that Idia was the wife of Oba Ozolua and the mother of the heir apparent to the throne, crowned prince Esigie. As it was a tradition, once an Oba was enthroned, the mother was killed, but Oba Esigie refused hence he hid his mother, Idia, some distance away from the palace. Idia was gallant in action and war-like in nature. The Benins continued to demand that the Oba should present his mother to be killed as demanded by custom and as done by the previous Obas. Esigie in his wisdom agreed to present his mother if only the kingmakers were willing to present theirs since the kingmakers were crowned just like the Obas, that made the chiefs to abandon the customary practice of killing the Oba's mother.

Oral tradition has it that the people of Igala attacked Benin kingdom during the reign of Oba Esigie which was the handwork of Chief Oliha, who felt betrayed by the Oba because his wife was enticed by Oba's servant, Uke, and she fell a victim, to discredit the claims of Chief Oliha about his wife. Before then, Chief Oliha was boastful that his wife was the most faithful and loyal of all the women. She fell to Uke's antics and that led her being killed by her husband Chief Oliha. According to Salami (2001), this offended Chief Oliha. He killed his wife and wanted vengeance against Oba Esigie. He sent his messenger to the Attah of Igala lying that Oba Esigie was preparing to wage war against his kingdom and that he should come down to Benin with his warriors to fight Oba Esigie and that he would assist them in the battle against Oba of Benin. He sent his servant again to Oba of Benin, telling him that the Attah of Igala was on his way to attack Benin kingdom and that he should be ready to defend the kingdom. According to

Ebohon (1972), when the news got to the Oba of Benin, he sent a message to his mother, Idia, that he would wage war against Attah and his people. His mother replied “My son, my beloved son, who saved me from the hands of the Edos and from the death which my predecessors suffered stay in your palace and let me fight the Idahs” Ebohon further stated, that when her son received the message, he replied his mother “I have done myself good by saving your life, and your life I shall continue to protect while I live, stay at home dear mother, women never go to war”. Before the message got to her, she had prepared to march Benin warriors to Idah. According to Salami (2001), “The warriors came out in their thousands with Idia and her-head slave in front. As the missionaries saw this, they also arose to assist Oba Esigie and his mother in this battle. They were so challenged by Idia’s boldness that they put their Bibles aside for a while and carried guns to fight the Igala”. The Benin army was victorious in their battle against Attah and his people. Oral tradition has it that Idia possessed strong magical powers which enable her to change to Lion, tiger, etc. She brought the Ekassa dance from Idah which formed part of burial ceremonies today. Salami (2001), notes that “this constitutes a great contribution to the cultural development of the Benin people.

### **Emotan**

Benin kingdom during the pre-colonial era witnessed massive contributions of women to the building and sustenance of Benin kingdom. “Emotan in Bini history was a quiet, simple market woman, who despite her status and the public opinion of the period took a resolve to change her society for the better. Emotan advocated the participation of

women in activities outside the home, especially income generating ones”, says Evwierhoma (2009). She was not intimidated by the menfolk who dominated the political terrain. It was not common to see women taking centre stage in that era despite the inferiority ascribed to women. According to Salami (2001), “she feared nobody but respected all. Her courage in preaching against injustice is worthy of note. For this, she was feared and respected by the people of Benin. She fought against injustice and oppression of the weak”.

Among her contributions to the kingdom, the most notable one was her role in helping Prince Ogun (who later took the title of Oba Ewuare) to ascend the throne. Salami (2001), says Oba Eware was conspired against because of his boldness, knowledge and of his power. Oba Orobiru was coaxed to send prince Ogun into exile thereby preventing him from becoming Oba. Evwierhoma (2009), states that “she rendered assistance uncommon to her gender at the time, to Ewuare the Great, also known as Ogun, to retire from exile and ascend the throne of Benin, as king, banishing the Usurper, Uwaifiokun. Thus, Emotan can be said to affirm the historical projection of women through the various facets of time – the now, the then, and the next”.

### **Challenges Hindering Benin Women**

There are many challenges facing Benin Women and women in general but three of them will be discussed here.

#### **1. Economic Challenge:**

Poverty remains a major impediment largely because the daily struggle for survival creates obstacles for women's engaging in political and other activities. A number of women who would otherwise have embarked on political lives are discouraged by lack of funds not only for financing electoral campaigns, but access to resources adequate to undertaking significant initiatives. Right from their earliest youth, women are brought up in such a way that even as adults; they perform specific tasks which are mainly domestic.

## **2. Socio-Trado-Cultural Challenge:**

The Benin women are faced with socio-trado-cultural challenge, which might be considered perennial. It shapes people's sense of identity and the ways in which they behave, either as individuals or in groups. Up till date, Benin holds tenaciously to traditions and customs. A political career usually emerges as a second or third job. Oral tradition has it that, these perceptions are closely connected to a traditional understanding of space as private and public, women generally being relegated to the former, even to the exclusion of the latter. These notions are remarkably persistent and lying at the very heart of most of the difficulties women face not only in politics, but also in achieving credibility and make impact within this sphere.

## **3. The Challenge of Inferiority Complex:**

Inferiority complex is only the factor challenging the Benin women and women in Africa generally. Women unconsciously accepted that it is a man's world. It was an abomination for women to cultivate some farm products like yam because of the metaphysical

implications involved in the cultivation; yam is considered the king of farm products which men alone can cultivate. According to Ebohon (1996), “the African cultures and traditions in diaspora have always had the African women in a secondary position even now despite the development and the so-called civilization”. Mental and psychological emancipation from the belief transplanted in women will help Benin women to get the total freedom. Women today are not sure if they can challenge the menfolk in fostering peace and coordinating the society even when the door is open. Ebohon (1996), again, stated that “tradition is tradition... only time may be able to partially erode the socio-trado-cultural stigma on the African woman, because these customs are tied to their existence and written in their blood”. Indeed tradition has held women captive and implanted in them inferiority complex.

### **Political Roles of Women in Benin Kingdom**

Nigerian women were an integral part of the political set up of their communities. For instance, in pre-colonial Bornu, women played active roles in the administration of the state, complementing the roles played by male counterparts. Also, Women also played a very significant role in the political history of ancient Zaria. The modern city of Zaria was founded in the first half of the 16th century by a woman called Queen Bakwa Turuku. She had a daughter called Amina who later succeeded her as Queen. Queen Amina was a great and powerful warrior. She built a high wall around Zaria in order to protect the city from invasion and extended the boundaries of her territory beyond Bauchi and she made

Zaria prominent Commercial Centre. The story was not different in ancient Yorubaland, where Oba ruled with the assistance of a number of women referred to as female traditional chiefs. They consisted of eight titled ladies of the highest rank. The significant role played by prominent women such as Moremi of Ife, Emotan of Benin and Omu Okwei of Ossomari, cannot be ignored. Moremi and Emotan were great amazons who displayed wonderful bravery and strength in the politics of Ife and Benin respectively, while Omu Okwei dominated the commercial scene of Ossomari in present day Delta State. The table below shows the statistics of women traditional rulers in the Pre-colonial days in Nigeria

Colonialism affected Nigerian women adversely as they were denied the franchise. It was also only in the 1950s that women in Southern Nigeria were given the franchise. Three women were appointed into the House of Chiefs, namely Chief (Mrs) Olufunmilayo RansomeKuti (appointed into the Western Nigeria House of Chiefs); Chiefs (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo and Janet Mokelu (both appointed into the Eastern Nigeria House of Chiefs). The women's wings of political parties possessed very little functional relevance. (Kolawale et al, 2013). The Post-Colonial Period During this period, Nigerian women began to play very active roles. In 1960, Mrs. Wuraola Esan from Western Nigeria became the first female member of the Federal Parliament. In 1961, Chief (Mrs) Margaret Ekpo contested and won the election, becoming a member of the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly till 1966, Mrs. Janet N. Mokelu and Miss Ekpo A. Young also contested elections and won, they became members of the Eastern House of Assembly. In northern

Nigeria, however, women were still denied the franchise even after independence until 1979 that is, the return of civilian government. As a result of this denial, prominent female politicians like Hajia Gambo Sawaba in the North could not vote and be voted for. Second Republic (1979-1983), saw a little more participation of women in politics. A few Nigerian women won elections into the House of Representatives at the national level and also few women won elections into the State Houses of Assembly respectively. However, During the same period, only two women were appointed Federal Ministers. They were Chief (Mrs) Janet Akinrinade and Mrs Adenike Ebun Oyagbola, Minister for Internal Affairs and Minister for National Planning respectively. Mrs. Francesca Yetunde Emmanuel was the only female Permanent Secretary (first in the Federal Ministry of Establishment and later Federal Ministry of Health). A number of women were appointed Commissioners in the states also. In 1983, Ms Franca Afegbua became the only woman to be elected into the Senate. Also, very few women contested and won elections into the Local Government Councils during this period.

With the advent of Buhari led military rule, the first formal quota system was introduced by the Federal Government as regards the appointment of women into governance. He directed that at least one female must be appointed as a member of the Executive Council in every state. All the states complied with this directive; some states even had two or three female members. In the early 1990s, two women were appointed Deputy Governors. These were Alhaja Latifat Okunu of Lagos State and Mrs Pamela Sadauki of Kaduna State. There was, however, no female minister, as well as no female member of the

defunct Supreme Military Council or the later Armed Forces Ruling Council. Third Republic The 1990 transition elections into local governments heralding the Third Republic saw few women emerge as councilors and only one woman emerged as Chairperson of a Local Government Council in the Western part of the country. During the gubernatorial elections, no female governor emerged in any of the states. Only two female Deputy Governors emerged, namely: Alhaja Sinatu Ojikutu of Lagos State and Mrs. Cecilia Ekpenyong of Cross River State. In the Senatorial election held in 1992, Mrs. Kofo Bucknor Akerele was the only woman who won a seat in the Senate. Very few women won election into the House of Representatives. One of these few was Chief (Mrs) Florence Ita Giwa who won in the Calabar Constituency. President Babangida's Transitional Council appointed two women in January 1993, namely Mrs. Emily Aiklmhokuede and Mrs. Laraba Dagash. In the Interim National Government of Chief Ernest Shonekan, two female ministers were appointed into the cabinet. General Abacha administration also had a number of female ministers at various times in his cabinet, including Chief (Mrs) Onikepo Akande and Ambassador Judith Attah. During the military regime of General Abdulsalami Abubakar (June 9, 1998 - May 29, 1999), there were two women in the Federal Executive Council: Chief (Mrs) Onikepo Akande (Minister for Commerce) and Dr. Laraba Gambo Abdullahi (Minister of Women Affairs), (Kolawale et al, 2013). The return of democracy in May 29, 1999 gave hope for a new dawn in the struggle for more participation of women in Nigeria politics. Democracy is about fair representation of all interest groups in the society and the low representation of women is

a violation of the principle of democracy. Despite all efforts put in place, we are yet to meet the 30% and 35% affirmation as contained in Beijing platform for action and National Gender Policy respectively. There have been five administrations between 1999 and 2015. President Obasanjo occupied the office of president between 1999 and 2007, President Umaru Musa Yaradua (2007-2010), President Goodluck Jonathan (2010-2011; 2011-2015) and President Muhammadu Buhari (at present). The position of vice president in Nigeria followed the same trend as that of the president. Four males have dominated the seat since the return of democracy in 1999.

### **Social Roles**

The kingdom of Benin (in present-day Nigeria) was plunged into a state of turmoil at the end of the fifteenth century when the oba (king) Ozolua died and left two powerful sons to dispute succession. His son Esigie controlled Benin City, while another son, Arhuan, was based in the equally important city of Udo about twenty miles away. The ensuing civil war severely compromised Benin's status as a regional power and undermined Benin City's place at the political and cultural center of the kingdom. Exploiting this weakness, the neighboring Igala peoples sent warriors across the Benue River to wrest control of Benin's northern territories. Esigie ultimately defeated his brother and conquered the Igala, reestablishing the unity and military strength of the kingdom. His mother Idia received much of the credit for these victories as her political counsel, together with her mystical powers and medicinal knowledge, were viewed as critical

elements of Esigie's success on the battlefield. To reward and honor her, Esigie created a new position within the court called the iyoba, or queen mother, which gave her significant political privileges, including a separate residence with its own staff.

As mother of the king, Idia and later iyobas wielded considerable power. Until recent times, the queen mother, who bore the oba's first son, had no other children and devoted her life to raising the future ruler of the kingdom, a role she was destined to play even before her own birth. Queen mothers were therefore viewed as instrumental to the protection and well-being of the oba and, by extension, the kingdom. Indeed, obas wore carved ivory pendant masks representing the iyoba during ceremonies designed to rid the kingdom of malevolent spiritual forces. An especially fine example of such masks in the Metropolitan Museum's collection dates from the sixteenth century and is believed to depict Idia herself (1978.412.323). Two vertical bars of inlaid iron between the eyes allude to medicine-filled incisions that were one source of Idia's metaphysical power. Within the court, the queen mother's political status was equal to that of a senior chief, and she enjoyed the right to commission precious works of art for personal and devotional use. Images of the iyoba found on the cast brass objects with which she was associated, such as *ikegobo* (altars to the hand) (1979.206.218) and *urhoto* (rectangular altarpieces) (1991.17.111), portray her in a shirt of coral beads flanked by attendants bearing symbols of political and spiritual power. These attendants, also depicted in carved ivory (1978.412.302), were women under the tutelage of the iyoba destined for

marriage to her son, the future oba. As with ancestral obas, deceased iyobas were venerated with cast-brass memorial heads (1977.187.36) fitted with carved ivory tusks and displayed on royal altars.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

## ARO ARO IDEN

### 4.1 Early Life of Aro Iden

Iden, a lady in her mid-20s, was born in Oka village, currently part of the Upper Sokponba Road, Benin City. Ewuakpe was very young and lacked the tact of governance, which made the early part of his reign turbulent. The crown was passed over to him because his father, Akiennuzama, declined to be the Oba, as he was too advanced in age to be belaboured with community services. Ewuakpe ascended the throne and was insensible to his people's plight. The Oba's hard-heartedness and disrespect for human lives were challenged. The people, beginning from the Royal Slaves (Ovien) and other palace attendants, the chiefs to traders deserted the palace, leaving it for the Oba and his numerous wives. As a result of this, economic and social activities were grounded and the Oba was troubled. As a way out of his predicament, Ewuakpe visited his mother's town, Ikoka, where he was treated with disdain. In anger, he placed a curse on the people and the town and returned to Benin. During this period, all his wives but Queen Iden left him. She became his only companion and comforter. The situation humbled the king and he began to look for ways to solve the problem.

Knowing that her husband had made mistakes and was regretted his actions, Iden consulted the oracle and was told that human sacrifice would be needed to appease the gods and restore peace and unity in the kingdom. Queen Iden offered herself as the sacrificial lamb. Iden requested that her grave, which was at the Oba Market be kept

clean at all times. She also cautioned against treading on it as a mark of respect for her sacrifice. As soon as Oba Ewuakpe finished the sacrifice, some of the prominent chiefs that had deserted him returned and called for a truce between the king and his subjects. Not long after, other Benin chiefs started paying him homage again and pledged their loyalty. Peace, unity and prosperity returned to the kingdom. The entire kingdom was at peace till the end of Ewuakpe's reign.

To honour Iden for her belief in oneness and love for the Benin Kingdom, the descendants of the kingdom dedicated February 14, every year to celebrate her.

#### **4.2 Marriage life of Aro Iden**

Aro Iden was the wife of Oba Ewakpe the great. Shortly after Oba Ewakpe was enthroned, there was a revolt against him by the Benin people. The people were angered against the unwholesome human sacrifice for ritual performance at his mother's funeral. Salami (2001), notes that as a result, they went to the palace and seized all the valuable property there, threw open the doors of the harem for the wives and the children to return to their parents, the slaves were given liberty, the sword bearer and others were also set free. He was left with nothing. Queen Aro Iden chose to stay with him and bore the shame together. Oral tradition has it that she was the only companion that was left to console the Oba, and she brought the idea of consulting the oracle with their last savings. According to Salami, (2001), the oracle demanded a human sacrifice and other food items as the price for regaining his former glory. Neither servant nor slave to be sacrificed.

Queen Aro Iden offered herself to be sacrificed if that would bring joy and restore the glory of the land. After prolonged argument between Aro Iden and Oba Ewakpe, according to oral tradition, Aro Iden was sacrificed by being buried alive and other food items provided. Salami (2001), opines that “She was a martyr who died for the continuation of the throne of Benin”. Indeed, she was, she is and continue to be a martyr and a reference point.

In general, one can say that women in that era were an integral part of the political set up of their communities, although they assumed responsibilities different from that of men, in most cases these responsibilities were complimentary to that of men.

### **4.3 Challenges of Aro Iden**

There are many challenges facing Benin Women and women in general but three of them will be discussed here.

#### **Economic Challenge:**

Poverty remains a major impediment largely because the daily struggle for survival creates obstacles for women’s engaging in political and other activities. A number of women who would otherwise have embarked on political lives are discouraged by lack of funds not only for financing electoral campaigns, but access to resources adequate to undertaking significant initiatives. Right from their earliest youth, women are brought up in such a way that even as adults; they perform specific tasks which are mainly domestic.

### **Socio-Trado-Cultural Challenge:**

The Benin women are faced with socio-trado-cultural challenge, which might be considered perennial. It shapes people's sense of Aro Identity and the ways in which they behave, either as individuals or in groups. Up till date, Benin holds tenaciously to traditions and customs. A political career usually emerges as a second or third job. Oral tradition has it that, these perceptions are closely connected to a traditional understanding of space as private and public, women generally being relegated to the former, even to the exclusion of the latter. These notions are remarkably persistent and lying at the very heart of most of the difficulties women face not only in politics, but also in achieving credibility and make impact within this sphere.

### **The Challenge of Inferiority Complex:**

Inferiority complex is only the factor challenging the Benin women and women in Africa generally. Women unconsciously accepted that it is a man's world. It was an abomination for women to cultivate some farm products like yam because of the metaphysical implications involved in the cultivation; yam is considered the king of farm products which men alone can cultivate. According to Ebohon (1996), "the African cultures and traditions in diaspora have always had the African women in a secondary position even now despite the development and the so called civilization". Mental and psychological emancipation from the belief transplanted in women will help Benin women to get the total freedom. Women today are not sure if they can challenge the menfolk in fostering peace and coordinating the society even when the door is open.

Ebohon (1996), again, stated that “tradition is tradition... only time may be able to partially erode the socio-trado-cultural stigma on the African woman, because these customs are tied to their existence and written in their blood”. Indeed, tradition has held women captive and implanted in them inferiority complex.

#### **4.4 Sacrifices of Iden**

Queen Iden, who according to Benin History, laid down her life for the preservation of the Kingdom. She was the courageous and loyal wife of Oba Ewuakpe who ruled Benin Kingdom from around 1700AD. On how she eventually sacrificed herself for the people, ancient Benin folklore had it that between 1440-1473 AD, Oba Ewuare had prophesied that a time would come when Benin Kingdom would experience bad times. His prophecy came to pass during the reign of Oba Ewuakpe. Oba Ewuakpe’s reign was not a good one, as a time came when his subjects started revolting against him. Eventually, his wives, servants and palace chiefs abandoned him, except for one of his wives, Queen Iden. Things were so tough for him that he had to relocate to his mothers village, Ikoka, where the people also rejected him. Disheartened by their behavior, he came back to Benin with Queen Iden as the only person he could rely on. Queen Iden decided to inquire of an Oracle to know the source of her husband’s woes and how to put an end to it. According to the Oracle, the only way for normalcy to return to the kingdom was for a human sacrifice to be performed to appease the gods.

Queen Iden came back bearing the message from the Oracle to the King who was distraught because there was no other human being he could use, free or bond besides his

wife, Queen Iden, and since his subjects were no longer loyal to him, it was impossible to get someone who was willing to do it. It was then Queen Iden volunteered herself to be used for the sacrifice demanded by the gods. The idea was initially rejected by the king, until it became glaring that she wouldn't back down, he eventually conceded and buried her alive on the spot near Oba market in the heart of Benin city. However, before she was sacrificed, she requested that her grave site be kept clean at all times and that no person should tread on her grave else such trespasser should be killed as a mark of respect for her, which was strictly adhered to, until the Benin invasion by the British forces in 1897. As soon as Oba Ewuakpe conducted the sacrificial rituals, the kingdom started experiencing calm as prominent chiefs called for a truce between the Oba and his aggrieved subjects. It wasn't long before the entire kingdom was reconciled back and remained loyal to the royal majesty till the end of his reign. The king told the subjects about the loyal sacrifice of his wife Iden, who gave her life for the kingdom. Her tomb still lies near Oba market, Benin city, at the spot where she was buried alive till this day.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **5.0 EVALUATION, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

#### **5.1 Evaluation**

Iden was the wife of Oba Ewakpe the great. Shortly after Oba Ewakpe was enthroned, there was a revolt against him by the Benin people. The people were angered against the unwholesome human sacrifice for ritual performance at his mother's funeral. Queen Iden, laid down her life for the preservation of the Kingdom. She was the courageous and loyal wife of Oba Ewuakpe who ruled Benin Kingdom from around 1700AD. On how she eventually sacrificed herself for the people, ancient. Queen Iden volunteered herself to be used for sacrifice demanded by the gods.

#### **5.2 Conclusion**

From the study it can be concluded that Queen Iden sacrifice helped shape Benin Kingdom. She was the queen during the reign of Oba Ewuape in about 1700 AD. She is known to have volunteered herself as a sacrificial lamb for the welfare of her husband and that of the entire kingdom. Her husband, Oba Ewuape, ascended the throne in very turbulent times. His kingdom and chiefs rebelled against him. He had the kingdom but had no subjects. His palace was deserted, save for Queen Iden. She stood by Oba Ewuape and refused to leave the palace. The oracle divined that for peace to be restored to Benin Kingdom, a human sacrifice was needed. Queen Iden offered herself as a

sacrificial lamb for the restoration of the monarchy. She was given a befitting burial and her tomb lies close to Oba market (in Benin City) till date.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

The objective of the study was on the roles of women in Benin Kingdom, using Aro Iden as case Study.

It can be recommended that womea should stay with their husband in time of trouble

It is important that women be politically empowered to assert themselves, have a stake and appreciate their life's worth and be in a position to take their destiny into their own hands

Again, gender equality is not only women's responsibility; it is the responsibility of men and women.

Women can be helped to get over the socio-trado-cultural stigma. Gender equality is critical to the development and peace of every nation or kingdom.

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